
THE WALDENSIAN DISSENT

Persecution and Survival, *c.* 1170–*c.* 1570

Gabriel Audisio

Translated by Claire Davison



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I

1170–1215: DECISIVE AND PURPOSIVE ORIGINS

LEGENDS

The early days of the Poor of Lyons, as is the case for many other movements, be they anti-establishment, minority, religious or otherwise, were so unassertive that they were hardly noticed at all. Later, faced with the movement's survival and endurance, partisans and antagonists vied imaginatively with each another – for the notion of historical precision was not an issue in the middle ages – in some cases admittedly with the best of intentions, to explain and thus describe the origins of this curious group.

For this reason, within the group from Lyons the myth grew up that their origins dated back to apostolic times, a belief that was to persist for centuries. To understand their reasoning, it must be borne in mind that the worst criticism that could be addressed to Christians appearing not fully to respect the faith or the moral doctrine of the Church was that of being innovatory. Like all revealed religions, Christianity is built around a canon to be conserved and a message to be transmitted. This was the role both of the 'Tradition' in the true sense of the term and also of the Roman hierarchy which had every intention of controlling the transmission of the message and, as doctrinal authority, supervising its authenticity. They reasoned that God had spoken once and for all through his son Jesus Christ and that his Word addressed to mankind was entirely contained in the bible. Innovation therefore amounted to making a stand not only against the Church and the church hierarchy, but also against mankind by degrading the divine message and compromising the promise of salvation, and ultimately against God himself.

To rebut the accusation of being innovatory, the Poor of Lyons set about tracing back their origins as far as possible. Ancient times were a guarantee of authenticity, of intrinsic truth. As we know, both Luther and the sixteenth-century Protestants took the same step, refusing to be suspected of innovation. And how much further can one go than the apostles, the founding fathers of the Church? This was illustrated by Pierre Griot, who, when questioned in 1532 by the inquisitor as to the authors of 'this law', replied that they were the apostles. This was certainly what the community members told one another. Two of Griot's superiors, whom we will have occasion to return to further on, wrote in 1530 that their people had survived in spite of hardship 'for four hundred years and even, as our elders tell us, since apostolic times'. This legend persisted until the nineteenth century but no-one today could take it seriously.

Without wishing to assert direct links with the apostles, another opinion was also held among the Poor of Lyons which was taken up and challenged by their adversaries; this alleged that their origins dated back to the time of pope Sylvester. It was he who, by accepting the famous donation of Constantine I at the beginning of the fourth century, had led the Church away from its mission by making it not just a spiritual but a temporal power. The dissenters from Lyons were said to be the descendants of the first opposers of the Roman Church's historical deviation. This belief may have become common within the group in the fourteenth century, but even from the first half of the thirteenth century, anti-Waldensian polemicists had set about refuting it. No-one today can subscribe to this point of view either. Such debates are no longer valid; it is now unanimously accepted that the Poor of Lyons date back to the twelfth century. If, however, it appears simple to agree on the century of their origin, the shadows of doubt are far from having been lifted altogether.

VAUDÈS

In spite of a great number of scholarly studies, we know no more today than we did around thirty years ago about the founder, the key figure in this spiritual adventure. No new document has come to light since then, and a great many uncertainties persist about the man from Lyons, for it was indeed in Lyons that it all began. In the first place, his name. What was he called? Elementary as the question may be, it is not easy to answer. If we turn to original documents from within the community, we only come up with three, one of which is rather late. The first is the confession of faith that the group's leader is thought to have signed in

about 1180; the second is the account of a conference held in Bergamo in 1218 between the ultramontane and the Lombard divisions, the two groups the movement was composed of at the time. The third piece of documentary evidence is a series of letters exchanged between the Lombards and their Austrian brothers but these date from 1368. It is here that we can find reference to their legendary origins dating back to pope Sylvester and also to a certain Peter the Waldense, or 'from the valley', who was supposed to have reinstated the movement at the end of the twelfth century. We have already dismissed the legend, but let us consider the name. The Christian name Peter first appeared in the fourteenth century, that is, 150 years after the man's death. If, however, the followers needed to select a Christian name, what better choice could they have for their founder than naming him after the apostle on whom Christ had founded his Church? But since no contemporary reference exists to confirm the name's authenticity, it may consequently be dismissed. Opinion is now unanimous on this matter too.

As for the surname, many people are doubtless familiar with the one traditionally employed which can still be found in recently published works. The founder of the Poor of Lyons was supposedly called Peter Waldo. The Christian name has been dropped; can the surname at least be maintained? We may leave aside those polemicists who were the man's contemporaries, or who came just after him, who tended to go round and round in etymological circles in their attempts to explain the term *vaudois* – in Latin, *valdenses*. They all agreed, however, that the generic term should be linked back to the founder of what was called a sect or a heretical tendency. This would indeed appear to be the case. If we turn to the aforementioned original documents, they would appear to employ only the adjectival form which in Latin, the language used exclusively for writing, gives, for instance, *societas valdesiana* (the Waldensian group). There is just one instance where the noun form of his name is used. In the confession of faith of 1180, the man in question wrote of himself *ego valdesius*. This does not, however, tell us what the founding figure was called in the spoken language of the time, nor does it help us to decide what we should call him. We do not know the exact form of his name, that used by his family, friends and neighbours in the Franco-Provençal vernacular used in Lyons in the twelfth century. Since we only have the Latin translation, we have to try to work back to the original. If we leave aside the Italian form 'Valdo' for which there is no evidence, our choice is limited to two alternatives: 'Valdès' or 'Vaudès'. In 1980, Gonnet showed convincingly that 'Valdo' should be abandoned in favour of 'Vaudès'. In a note published in 1982, Thouzellier explained why she preferred the other form, 'Valdès', which seemed to her better

to conform to the Franco-Provençal employed in Lyons at the time. The detail is a minor one. Respecting these recent publications, the present study will use either Valdès or Vaudès, even if I have a slight inclination for the meridional ring of the latter term, for French was not spoken at that time in Lyons.

We now have a man whose surname we know but who lacks a Christian name. We must be satisfied with this. Little else is known of the man Vaudès. He lived in Lyons and belonged to the city's elite. He was most likely a merchant, which comes as no surprise considering the flourishing commercial status of the city which was an international crossroads on the river Rhône. It was not for these reasons that Vaudès remained famous. His renown derives from his religious conversion. This wealthy figure, who apparently handled business investments for the archbishopric (which was, incidentally, suspected of practising usury towards the poor), one day decided to give up his worldly life and his family and to 'strip himself bare of all his possessions to follow the bare Christ', as Walter Map wrote.

How and why did Vaudès make up his mind to change his life? The exact circumstances are unclear since several accounts exist of this incident, the repercussions of which were to extend well beyond the man himself. The most endearing version tells how Vaudès was enthralled by the story of St Alexis, sung by a minstrel. This legend belonged to the tradition of popular medieval tales which inspired the piety and imagination of congregations and clergy alike. According to the *Golden Legend*, Alexis, the son of a rich noble Roman prefect in the fourth century, decided to give up his life of ease on his wedding night. Having persuaded his bride to remain chaste, he fled to Asia Minor. 'On his arrival, he distributed amongst the poor all the goods he had brought with him, then, clad in rags, he went to join the poor gathered beneath the porch of the Church of the Virgin Mary. Of the alms he collected, he kept just what he needed, the rest he gave to the poor.' The story of St Alexis does not end here. Years later, he returned by chance to his father's house where his father and the other members of his household did not recognise him. He thus finished his life collecting alms in his own home. The details are not of great importance; the meaning of this edifying tale is clear and Vaudès hearkened to it: it was the call to poverty.

The other version is less spectacular and perhaps more plausible. Vaudès was asking questions about his eternal salvation, which he feared might be jeopardised by his great wealth. Listening to the gospel, he is said to have been very moved by the story of the rich young man to whom Jesus replies: 'If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast

and give to the poor and thou shalt have treasure in heaven; then come and follow me.' What doubtless struck the rich merchant from Lyons even more were Jesus' remarks once the young man had left, for his words are indeed very strong if taken literally: 'Verily I say unto you. It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God' (Matthew 19: 21–4). From this moment on, as Vaudès put this evangelical advice strictly into practice, radically changing his life and exhorting a group of people around him to do the same, the adventure of the Poor of Lyons had begun.

As has already been seen, the texts issuing from the group are few and far between and, what is more, very short on information concerning the first years of their existence. More is to be found written by their adversaries and in particular the inquisitors. This is how one of them, Bernard Gui, evoked the origins of the Waldensians in his work *Practica inquisitionis heretice pravitatis*. Although it was compiled later, at the beginning of the fourteenth century, the inquisitor's manual written by the Dominican friar merits our attention. Indeed, the chapter dedicated to the Waldensians is largely inspired by, if not in many places directly copied from, another inquisitor who lived in the thirteenth century, Stephen of Bourbon. He was virtually a contemporary of Vaudès and had written *De septem donis Spiritus Sancti* between 1250 and 1261. Let us then turn to Bernard Gui's treatise at the chapter bearing the title *De secta valdensium*:

The sect or heretical movement of the Waldensians or Poor of Lyons began in about the year of our Lord 1170. Its author was an inhabitant of Lyons, one Valdesius or Valdensis from whom the name of the sect's members derives. He was rich but having given up all his worldly goods, he set about observing a life of poverty and evangelical perfection, following in the steps of the apostles. He had the holy scriptures and other books of the bible translated for his own use into the vernacular, along with a collection of maxims of St Augustine, St Jerome, St Ambrose and St Gregory which were distributed bearing titles that he and his followers called *sententiae*. They read them frequently but barely understood them; they were self-infatuated, although they were of little education, and usurped the function of apostles and dared preach the gospel in the streets and in town squares. The above-mentioned Valdesius or Valdensis encouraged a number of accomplices of both sexes in this presumption, sending them out to preach as disciples.

Let us stop reading for a moment. If we overlook the inquisitor's value judgements, which an unbiased, elementary sense of historical criticism requires us to do, what may still be retained from this account? It can be seen that three basic elements are established from the outset: poverty, preaching and the holy scriptures. These are the three struc-

turing pillars of Vaudès's inspiration which are both essential and inseparable. If only one or another is retained, or if one is overlooked, what remains could still characterise some religious order from the Church of Rome, or some dissenting group, but certainly not the Poor of Lyons. In their initial movement, in the first drive inspired by their founder, as in their history over the centuries despite its evolutions and adaptations, they were always to preserve these three defining characteristics, even if these too, as we shall see, were to be subjected to reorientations, reinterpretations and modifications over the centuries.

THE FOUNDATIONS

The bible

The bible, and more precisely the gospels, represented the original, fundamental basis of Vaudès's beliefs. As we saw above, it was after listening to the striking words of Jesus that Vaudès made up his mind to change his life so abruptly. This attitude is highly indicative. In Vaudès's opinion, which was later shared by his brethren, the Word of God was to be heard precisely and wholly. His Word was clear; there was no need whatsoever to interpret it. What mattered, so that they might apply it, was to understand it, but this the Church's official version, the 'Vulgate', rendered impossible because it was written in Latin. Hence the necessity to have the bible translated into the vernacular, starting with the gospels. Vaudès commissioned two clergymen from Lyons to do this, one of whom translated, while the other wrote the translation down. Once translated into a comprehensible language, the Word of God had to be applied to the letter. As we shall see later, this attitude was sometimes to have absurdly exacting consequences in practice. In this way, after reading from the Book of Matthew, Vaudès set the example of practising what was preached by giving up his belongings to make himself poor – in other words, a beggar.

Poverty

There are no grounds for doubting that at the basis of Vaudès's original inspiration is the call to poverty. All the contemporary writers agree on this point, from the inquisitors such as Stephen of Bourbon and Bernard Gui, the adversaries and contradictors, to the upholders of the Poor of Lyons. Indeed, the very name chosen by Vaudès's disciples, the Poor of Christ, or the Poor of Lyons is sufficiently revealing: it was through poverty that they chose to define themselves. There was nothing really

original in this, as we shall see further on. Particularly since the Gregorian reforms in the eleventh century, many church people had espoused a life of poverty in one way or another, and urged the clergy to do likewise. Seeking a return to evangelical poverty, Vaudès was in keeping with a trend that was quite powerful at the time. Begging, however, was a delicate topic. Society might feel threatened by idlers who, for allegedly religious reasons, claimed the right to live at its expense, giving nothing in return. Vaudès countered this objection with his own example. He began to preach.

Preaching

Like poverty, the need to proclaim the Word of God derived from clear evangelical instructions: 'Go ye therefore, and teach all nations ... teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you' (Matthew, 28: 19–20). This was Jesus' last message to his disciples. To Vaudès's mind, the duty to spread the good news was therefore imperative. The merchant from Lyons and the group that formed around him, following him and doing as he did, were, however, laymen. In the Roman Church, only clergymen could preach, as they had been trained for that mission. By challenging the clergy's monopoly of the Word, the Poor of Lyons provoked first astonishment, then reprobation and finally the condemnation of the Church hierarchy. But now let us get back to reading Bernard Gui:

Although they were ignorant and unlettered, these people, both men and women, went from village to village, going into people's homes and preaching in public squares and even in churches, the men in particular leaving behind them a host of misunderstandings and mistakes. The archbishop of Lyons, Jean aux Belles-Mains, commanded that they abandon such a presuming mission, but they flouted his authority, maintaining, in order to disguise their delusions, that one should obey God rather than men. God had ordered the apostles to preach the holy scriptures to all, they argued, taking upon themselves what had been said to the apostles, even having the audacity to declare themselves their imitators and successors on the grounds of their false profession of poverty and disguised by a mask of saintliness. They did indeed despise prelates and the clergy, claiming that they possessed abundant wealth and lived a life of pleasure.

The decisive issue was therefore that of preaching. The other matters – translating the holy scriptures and the life of poverty – were all rather edifying in the end, even if they unsettled those affluent clerics who came thus to be pointed out and denounced. For this reason, in the early years, there was no open conflict. Vaudès and his followers corresponded to the needs of both Christians and the clergy at the time. It is indeed

important not to lose sight of the context in which the events were taking place.

THE FIRST COMMUNITY

Vaudès's example and his preaching aroused interest and encouraged certain people to imitate him because his contemporaries were receptive to his ideas. Within a few years, by 1170–75, we can assume he had gathered a group of disciples, men and women, referred to in some texts as a *societas*. As poor, itinerant preachers, with the holy scriptures in their hands, they encouraged those they met to repent. They were neither the first nor the last to do so at the time. A trend of preaching had developed, recalling the poor, humble lives led by the first Christian community; sometimes overtly anti-clerical, it appealed to the population who often welcomed the attacks. In the twelfth century, groups of itinerant preachers had multiplied, all more or less accepted by the Church hierarchy. The call to poverty had been heard from the Petrobrusians, the Arnaldisti, the Henricians and the Humiliati. If the Roman Church was sometimes reluctant to analyse too closely the individual doctrines being taken into the streets or to check their orthodoxy, it was because a far greater threat, that of the Cathars, was growing in the south of France. This movement of dissent had also met with local approbation, the population being shocked by the lives led by the clerical orders and receptive to the ideas expressed by the Cathar itinerants whose lives were obviously in greater conformity with those of the apostles than were those of the clergy. It was because of the peril represented by the Cathars that the Church also delayed dealing with Vaudès and his preachers.

Even today, some people see little difference between the Cathars (or Albigensians) and the Waldensians (or Poor of Lyons) or even fail entirely to distinguish them. The truth of the matter is that the two religious groups only resemble each other in form. The fundamental difference between them is the Cathars' manichean doctrine which maintains that there are two equally powerful divine principles, one good, the other evil. Strictly speaking, the Cathars cannot be regarded as Christians. Is there any need to insist that such a conception of the world, of the creation and of salvation was completely anathema to Vaudès and his men? Besides, the Poor of Lyons renounced all personal possessions in the name of poverty, believing that a preacher who was dedicated to his mission did not have the time to concern himself with his own belongings. The holy scriptures said he should live by his ministry. This asceticism held no appeal for the Cathar dissenters who did not push strict obedience to that degree. The opposition between

the two movements was such that the Roman Church did not hesitate to play on it. Not only did some members of the Lyons group go and preach against the Cathars in the south-west of France in the years 1175–84, taking part in controversies against them, but after Vaudès was excommunicated in 1184, many bishops continued to turn a blind eye, so content were they with their anti-Albigensian preaching which was effective because the local people hearkened to it.

Vaudès and his friends were thus favoured by the people and relatively well thought of by the Church hierarchy. The only contention remained the question of preaching. No-one was allowed to appropriate for himself the role of preacher without official permission. It is highly likely that the men from Lyons had several wrangles with the archbishop of Lyons, the Cistercian Guichard. Whatever the case, a small delegation of members, probably led by Vaudès himself, set off for Rome in 1179 to petition the Third Lateran Council. It was in this city, after all, that they could find the supreme authorities of the Church: the pope and the Council. As a result of their supplication being examined, general approval was expressed, albeit only orally, of their life of poverty and they were given the permission, again not in writing, to preach so long as they first presented themselves to the local priest so that he could issue the appropriate licence. Pope Alexander III was so moved by the leader inspired by personal saintliness and the mission of the Church, that he is said to have kissed him.

CONFLICT

The archbishop of Lyons was left with the task of settling the issue in judicial terms, with the help of another Cistercian, Henry of Clairvaux, who had recently been made a cardinal and sent to France as a papal legate to fight against Catharism which the Lateran Council had just condemned. It was at this time, in March 1180, that the formal judicial pronouncement took place, known as Vaudès's 'Profession of Faith'. In this declaration, Vaudès and his gathering of followers attested their anti-Cathar orthodoxy, for this was the great preoccupation at the time, following a protocol issued in Rome. In return, the ecclesiastical authorities granted him the right to lead a life of itinerancy and poverty within the community, without worrying about tomorrow (referring to Matthew 6: 34), but having to beg for their daily bread. As for preaching, while it was not authorised in writing, it was accepted orally, following the decision made in Rome, providing they sought the local priest's agreement. So far, the Poor of Lyons would appear to have committed no 'error' since they had been examined in Rome and granted the right

to preach, albeit on certain conditions. It is thus clear to what extent the inquisitors and unfavourable chroniclers, and Bernard Gui in particular, maligned the 'sect' in its early years.

The two or three years which followed were marked by growing difficulties, which are hinted at rather than openly recorded in the texts. It may be that some Waldensian preachers, choosing to be demagogic, played on the anti-clerical sentiments of the people. Certain priests may have refused to grant them the right to preach, inspired by a vague feeling of jealousy towards these people who had chosen to be poor and whom the people often preferred to the priests themselves. Or again, it may be that some Waldensian preachers failed to get the essential local permission or even decided not to apply for it. What is certain, however, is that a number of women who had also been converted by Vaudès and who became his disciples also began to speak in public. This originality was unacceptable to the Church powers. Whatever happened, complaints from both sides must have reached the new archbishop, Jean aux Belles-Mains. He was doubtless irritated by the ill-defined movement over which he held little sway and probably sought to bring it under his control. In any case, he withdrew the verbal agreement and forbade preaching. Vaudès refused to obey, drawing confidence from the agreement accorded by the pope in Rome and from the words of the holy scriptures. Convinced he had been invested with a divine mission, he cited the proud reply given by Peter and the apostles: 'We ought to obey God rather than men' (Acts 5: 29) which amounted to considering his vocation to be superior to canon law.

His attitude can be understood by bearing in mind that he and his companions believed they had been specifically chosen and invested with a precise mission. The bible itself had taught them that people were responsible for the salvation of their fellow sinners. This unshakeable belief in their duty to spread the Word of God is clearly expressed by Vaudès's companion, Durand of Huesca, who described thus the Waldensians' mission in his treatise against the Cathars: 'To preach with the grace that God has accorded to us'. As Selge wrote thirty years ago, 'ardent faith and a sense of responsibility for the salvation of their neighbours: such was the essence of the Waldensian movement from its very origins'. If Vaudès did not submit to the prelate, it was because his conscience could not allow him to renounce his mission.

EXCOMMUNICATION

When they refused to comply, Vaudès and his friends were condemned and hounded from Lyons. The community sought refuge in other places

where they could preach: Languedoc, where Catharism was widespread; northern Italy where a host of spiritual movements were active; then other French-speaking regions and the borders of Germany. Lucius III pronounced, and the emperor confirmed, the papal condemnation in Verona in 1184, directed against the Waldensians and also the Italian Humiliati for having usurped the ministry of preaching without a mission. The excommunication marked them as 'schismatics', in other words they had disobeyed Church laws, but not as 'heretics'. It was to be reworded on several occasions on a local scale. Nothing appeared at that time to be definitive. Vaudès and his fellows continued to hope the sanction would be lifted. Excommunication orders indeed often went unheeded. The Poor of Lyons continued to preach against the Cathars and to appeal to people to be converted by good works and poverty. Even as late as 1190 and 1207, some bishops agreed to join in debates with them, proving that they did not see them as staunch heretics who should simply be eliminated.

Drawing on Durand of Huesca's treatise *Liber antiheresis*, which I referred to above, K.-V. Selge has clearly shown that Vaudès and his fellows did not only remain orthodox, but also had no intention of doing otherwise. The preachers were indeed fully accountable to Christ, Lord of the apostles. Vaudès himself was not the community's sovereign. His authority was that of founder, of the first man to be called. The only canon was that they should live like apostles by their ministry of preaching, according to the New Testament. This constitutional precept, immediate and unquestionable, did not imply disobedience to the Roman hierarchy. There is one limit to the obedience due to bishops: that of obedience to the mission of Christ. 'We ought to obey God rather than men' does not mean God alone should be obeyed, not men, but rather that God should be obeyed more. The Poor of Lyons therefore considered the excommunication to be unjust. But they had to continue obeying those priests whose sins did not call into question their function. The entire Church hierarchy was still to receive all due honour, so long as it did not contradict their mission held from Christ. Such was the conception of authentic Waldensianism from its origins until the middle of the thirteenth century, when, in around 1240, Moneta of Cremona could still witness to this ecclesiastical obedience under certain conditions. The situation had nonetheless seriously degenerated in between. The decisive era was between two crucial dates: 1184, the excommunication of Verona; and 1215, the anathema pronounced by the Fourth Lateran Council.

How can the final, definitive condemnation be explained? What happened in those thirty years? During this period, and even beyond, as

we have seen, the Poor of Lyons still considered themselves to be faithful to the Roman Church, in spite of their condemnation. How was this possible? The answer is partially to be found in the fact that, as has been seen, some prelates continued to discuss with them, in no way treating them as excommunicates. The judgement remained theoretical to some extent. Moreover, the Poor of Lyons were in constant contact with the people and lower clergy who considered them to be Catholics, that is to say anti-Cathars; this was also their own opinion. Last but not least, the preachers, who were dispersed in different regions, had no real, central organisation. Nor did they need one, since they had no particular doctrine to spread or uphold other than the holy scriptures themselves. Although they were dispersed in distant lands, the Brothers do not appear to have encountered any difficulties due to diverging opinions or feelings. There are, at least, no traces of any such tension. Yet difficulties did exist. The fact that the people and a good number of the clergy took the Brothers for good, devout Catholics gave them unity and helped prevent their relations with Rome becoming too strained. The situation reached breaking point after 1200.

EVOLUTIONS

Before this date, the movement had already evolved in different ways. Waldensianism in itself did not constitute an act of heresy. The followers were, however, guilty not only of disobedience towards the Church hierarchy. By acting as preachers 'as a direct result of the need for good works to attain salvation' (Selge), they found themselves preaching doctrines and encouraging practices considered heretical but which to their thinking were deeply rooted in the New Testament. Durand of Huesca, for example, rejected moderate predestination as taught by the Church. He continued to justify suffrage, or prayers, for the dead, which others rejected. Similarly, a new tendency emerged which inclined towards rejecting oaths and the death penalty, based on a literal interpretation of the holy scriptures (called biblicism or evangelism). This was a result of the Poor of Lyons being influenced by other dissents with which they had come into contact, notably in Lombardy after their first condemnation.

The other question, which was condemned as heresy, concerned the sacraments. The Poor of Lyons acknowledged them of course, particularly favouring baptism, the Lord's Supper and penance, and considered them necessary for salvation. They encouraged the sacrament of penance, insisting on it in their preaching, inciting their audiences to confess when most people considered it sufficient to meet the minimum

annual requirements for confession as defined by the Church hierarchy. But seeing how Christians held the clergy in contempt, giving them the pretext for shunning penance, the Poor of Lyons began to commend confession to laymen. Those listeners who had been moved by their preaching were therefore offered a form of spiritual direction. Furthermore, they had begun to organise their own holy communion on the model of the Last Supper. This innovation was doubtless not intended to oppose the Roman Church directly, but rather had a pastoral function prompted by the care of souls. Christians living in regions where heresy was widespread, notably the Cathars, were actively encouraged by heterodox preachers to neglect the sacraments, particularly renouncing the Lord's Supper. This was what the Poor of Lyons sought to remedy. Their practices, which the Church was not slow to deem 'heretical', had only been intended as an answer to a critical situation and to pressing needs. This was the first form of Waldensianism, which Selge called 'authentic Waldensianism'.

It is hardly surprising that within the group from Lyons divergences should have appeared. Indeed, preachers enjoyed great autonomy, and at the time there was neither a co-ordinating body nor a doctrinal authority. Certain trends thus led to schisms within the community. In Metz, for instance, in 1200 or thereabouts, a group of preachers siding with popular anti-clerical sentiment denied ministerial power to those members of the clergy whose lives did not conform to the apostolic model. Two of the community's founding principles came thus to be deformed. 'You shall obey God rather than men' became 'You shall obey God alone.' The original doctrine, claiming that those who lived apostolic lives had the power and the right to preach the gospel and consecrate the sacrament, was also overthrown. Those priests leading sinful lives were denied all their rights; any act realised under their responsibility was invalidated. This 'donatist' tendency only affected certain groups, however, and was in no way a reflection of the movement as a whole.

TENSION FROM WITHIN

The internal crisis may have been deferred for some time, but it nonetheless came to a head at the beginning of the thirteenth century. It was to last for ten years or more. On this matter let us again turn to Selge whose conclusions concerning the beginnings of the movement the present author shares, as the reader has doubtless realised:

It should be understood that the distinction we have highlighted between the Waldensians' original position and Waldensianism as described by Alain de Lille

does not imply we are dealing with two separate groups or two distinct orders. Nor are we facing two doctrinal systems which two professors might have presented and discussed in some theology department. Far from it. Rather, there was a fair number of isolated, revivalist preachers, all belonging to a community that had no fixed constitution and who crossed the country converting people. Some were more vigorously committed than others to criticising the Church: the theologian Alain of Lille brings to light their severest tenets and treats them as if they constituted a theological system of doctrine. In the Waldensian community itself, people were probably less sensitive to theological nuances: they were not always discussing doctrine, but they had to preach.

Vaudès thus came up against false brethren whom he dismissed unhesitatingly, as his confession of 1180 shows; at this time it was doubtless just a precautionary measure. The first reference to a separation from such followers can be found in Languedoc in around 1200. This concerned preachers who maintained that they alone had the right to baptise, denying the right to Cathars or priests of the Roman Church. They therefore rebaptised people. Anabaptists of this kind were also to be found in Provence, in Italy and in Trier. Greatly influenced by Catharism, which sanctioned the distribution of *consolamentum*, they claimed that only those in a state of total poverty when they died would find salvation. They insisted upon this drastic conversion before death. It was they who were 'excommunicated' by Vaudès in around 1200.

Discussions with the Lombardy Poor on the one hand, and with the Roman Church on the other, were far more awkward. The mission of the Poor of Lyons in Lombardy dated back to 1184 or before. The situation there was particularly propitious, despite language differences which were in fact minor. The Waldensians might even have been welcomed by the Humiliati. The tenets of this group were, however, much more extreme, with hints of 'donatism'; moreover, they allowed manual labour. Some of them were reconciled with the Church in about 1200, while others attempted to draw closer to the Poor of Lyons. The essence of the debate concerned the compatibility of manual labour and preaching. Vaudès's reply was unequivocal and negative: the apostolic preacher had to devote himself wholly to his mission. Those Brothers who failed to accept this could not belong to the Lyons group.

The second contention was over an institutional issue. The Lombardy Brothers elected one member as an 'intendant'; first, there was Jean of Ronco, then Oto of Ramazello. As far as Vaudès was concerned, Christ was their only leader. The donatist trend was at the core of other heated discussions: could the acts of an apostolic ministry be invalidated if its members failed to live up to the apostolic model? In the end, when

Vaudès had defined the grounds for exclusion, two independent groups co-existed in northern Italy: the Poor of Lyons and the 'Lombardy Poor'.

A CRITICAL SITUATION

Relations with the Roman Church were quite curious in the end. As far as Rome was concerned, the Waldensians had been condemned as schismatic from 1184 and had to be defeated if they would not listen to reason. This was, however, a purely theoretical stand and in practice things worked quite differently. Their staunchest and most intransigent opponents hunted down the Waldensians; those most sensitive to their mission left the self-appointed bearers of the Word of God to do their work and some were willing to exchange ideas with them or even help them in their apostolic duties. Vaudès and his group held that the preachers had been invested with a divine and therefore inalienable mission; as a consequence their excommunication pronounced in Verona was unjust. They hoped and even expected it would be lifted, so sure were they that their movement was still orthodox. But as time went by, their excommunication became more effective. Some members gave up hoping for an imminent reconciliation with Rome and rejected the Church hierarchy. Vaudès had actively devoted himself to maintaining orthodoxy and faithfulness to the Church according to his conception of it, in other words on certain conditions, and his death, which was apparently around 1205–7, certainly hastened the division.

In 1207, the Council of Pamiers spurred the movement on again. It was during this 'disputation', in other words a discussion according to the ecclesiastical model of the times, that Durand of Huesca, Vaudès's companion, although never once calling into question the divine mission with which Vaudès had been invested, was reconciled with Rome along with several of his friends. The 'Poor Catholics' thus came into existence. Durand doubtless expected the other Poor of Lyons to do likewise for it would have been the best means to protect them from slipping into heterodoxy – in other words, heresy. But Durand was soon disenchanted. Giving in to the local hierarchy would have signalled the end of the apostolic mission. Few men therefore followed Durand of Huesca; the last opportunity to unite had passed. They therefore needed to get organised to survive. It was decided that an annual synod uniting all the Brothers would be held, during which two 'rectors' from amongst the assembled members would be elected to hold office for one year. They would be responsible for controlling the preachers' mission. At the following assembly, they would have to account for their activities before new elections were held to replace them. Selge writes:

The second reorganisation concerned the *fractio panis*. It was decided that ministers would have to be elected for this. These ministers were not selected from among the preachers but from the novices, the *nuper conversi*, or from the *amici*, the followers who had heeded the preachers' spiritual guidance or *consilium spirituale*. This meant the Brothers' sole task continued to be their mission as preachers. It therefore solved the crisis which had grown from the fact that the Roman Church was no longer distributing the eucharist to the Waldensians. But it did not imply that a distinct hierarchy was created, vying with the hierarchy of Rome. The ministers were appointed for a period of service. Moneta of Cremona also testifies, after 1240, that even in his era, Waldensians would receive the eucharist from priests in the Roman Church if the latter were prepared to give it.

We may thus suppose that the Poor of Lyons had realised that their excommunication was effective, that they had to organise so as to cope with their most immediate needs and that, while they could continue hoping to be reconciled with Rome, it became less and less likely as time went by that a reconciliation would occur. The Poor of Lyons therefore maintained their original midway situation. They had not been swayed by the Lombardy Poor who deemed that the Roman priesthood was unjust and that the Roman Church was false (*ecclesia malignantium*). Nor had they been persuaded that when the Poor Catholics were reconciled with Rome, Rome had recognised the apostolic vocation of the Poor of Lyons. They were still waiting for this recognition; they had not given up hope, at least not entirely; some still remained hopeful. Their position was that of Vaudès: obedience on certain conditions. As Selge has demonstrated, the bone of contention was clear: had God entrusted a mission to the Poor of Lyons or not? Traditionally, the theological criteria enabling a divine mission to be identified were well established. As far as the Church hierarchy was concerned, a virtuous life and the biblical passages cited by the Waldensians were insufficient proof; in the eyes of the Poor of Lyons, they were perfectly adequate. Their opinion was shared by a considerable number of Christians and the clergy. Who was right?

The Poor of Lyons' apostolic vocation was never to be recognised by Rome, just as their excommunication was not to be lifted. On the contrary, the situation degenerated. As a result of being progressively and lastingly marginalised, the Poor of Lyons gradually hardened their positions, adopting tenets of other dissents that had not previously been theirs. In this way, they came increasingly to be charged by the Roman hierarchy with being mistaken and were judged to be tainted with heresy. The outcome was that the excommunication of Verona was confirmed and even extended. In 1215, the Fourth Lateran Council

condemned the Poor of Lyons and a number of other dissents not only as schismatic as had been the case in 1184, but as heretical: in other words, heterodox – erring in the ways of the faith. The anathema was pronounced against them and the rupture with Rome was complete. The hope of a reconciliation had been illusory.

Let us complete here the reading of the passage by Bernard Gui which we began earlier:

By arrogantly usurping the office of preachers, they became masters of error. When they were forbidden to preach, they disobeyed and were declared guilty of contumacy and were subsequently excommunicated and chased away from their home towns and their country. In the end, as they remained impenitent, a council held in Rome, before the Lateran Council, declared them schismatic and condemned them as heretical. Thus as their numbers grew on earth, they dispersed through the province, into neighbouring regions as far as the frontiers of Lombardy. Separated and cut off from the Church, associating instead with other heretics whose errors they adopted, their own deluded imaginings became mixed up with the errors and heresies of earlier heretics.

Whilst the inquisitor's obviously biased comments can be left to one side, we must accept that it was the most radical tendency within the Poor of Lyons, that which had remained a minority for a long time, which benefited from the definitive separation from Rome and came to dominate. From this point on, their history was to begin anew, telling of a dissenting religious minority that was organised, persecuted and dispersed.

A CONTEXTUAL EVALUATION

Before examining how the fate of the Waldensians was to be determined during the following two centuries, we should try to understand the sense of such a movement, bearing in mind its context. As was said earlier, there is nothing surprising in the fact that towards the end of the twelfth century there was an increasing number of calls for evangelical poverty. This is not to say they were banal, but many others before Vaudès had made their protests heard during what is known as the Gregorian reform of the eleventh century. Nor is there anything particularly original in the fact that the call for reform gave rise to an irrepressible need to preach. After Vaudès, Dominic of Guzman and, some years later, Francis of Assisi were to speak out in the same way. The former, who was sent to preach against the Albigenses (or Albigensians) in 1205, was the founder of the order of preaching brothers, the Dominicans; the latter, known as *il poverello*, was founder of the order of mendicant friars, the Franciscans. Even the association of

wandering preachers and poverty can be seen as a sign of the times. It is surely striking to notice that within half a century three strong voices of reform should have made themselves heard, all three urging changes in the same direction and originating in three Latin countries: Spain, France and Italy. There is no doubting the fact that the regrettable experience of the Waldensians, at least from the Roman Church's point of view, served as a lesson to the papacy when dealing with Dominic's and Francis's disciples later on. How can the uncompromising attitudes on both sides, which ultimately led to the breach, be explained?

Vaudès's real originality lies elsewhere. He was a layman and wished to remain so. He refused either to enter an existing religious order or to found a new one. He rejected the idea of a mould in which his own inspiration would lose its uniqueness. This attitude should be understood as an expression of the laity's desire to play a different, more important role in a Church which had become too clerical. The vindication can be interpreted in the same way as that of the newly emerging middle classes demanding a better status in the medieval society of the time. But the fact that laymen – and women, a matter which tends to be overlooked – should have taken up preaching threw into question the very foundations of the Church and society as they were defined then. We should remember that only about 10 per cent of the population was literate and that, even in a city as big as Lyons, the proportion can hardly have been more than 20 per cent, although the lack of dependable statistical evidence makes it absolutely impossible to offer even approximate figures. Reading therefore constituted a form of real power in this oral civilisation where hearing and memory played an essential role.

In such a context, the clergy enjoyed unequalled prestige. Overall, the clergy represented by far the best educated class of society. In social, cultural and religious terms, their status was outstanding. In their hands were concentrated all the powers that gave access to both reading and writing. They were the official bearers of the holy scriptures and represented the one and only means to have access to them. They alone could correctly interpret the Word of God. As a result, they also monopolised public speaking – in other words, preaching. When one bears in mind, firstly, the importance of the spoken word in such an oral world; secondly, the role that a literate class could play; and lastly, the esteem the clerics enjoyed (in spite of traditional, good-natured anti-clericalism) within this society shaped by and dependent on the religious orders, only then can one assess the importance of Vaudès and his followers and the challenge they, perhaps unconsciously, represented.

The reaction of the Church can now be understood. Internal quarrels were set aside. The clerical class as a whole put up a common, united

front before this attempt to break its monopoly over the spoken and written word. It is therefore hardly surprising that preaching became the core of the conflict. Neither the Roman Church nor even medieval society itself could accept Vaudès's 'alleged mission' without running the risk of undermining the very structures which made it function. The polemicists who were Vaudès's contemporaries, and the inquisitors who came after, all referred to his 'pretence', 'presumption' and 'usurpation'. They seized every opportunity to maintain that Vaudès's mission could not be genuine for the very reason that he had not been sent by the Church hierarchy. Furthermore, they did not hesitate to scoff at him and his companions who were deemed *idiote et illiterati* (ignorant and illiterate) by Stephen of Bourbon and Bernard Gui, for example. What was the truth of the matter?

We know that some genuine men of letters were to be found amongst Vaudès's first companions. Bernard Prim, Guillaume of Arnaud and especially Durand of Huesca whom we evoked earlier, the author of *Liber antihæresis*, were perfectly capable of engaging in theological discussions, contradictory debates and verbal fencing matches; they had excelled in such skills during the struggle with the Cathars. As for Vaudès himself, we know he did not understand Latin because he had a cleric translate the gospels. On these grounds alone he could be condemned as unlettered, since all literature was written in Latin, which was the language of the sciences, including religion. Vaudès, however, certainly knew how to read which, for a merchant, was to be expected. Even if Lyons was behind the times in terms of the commercial techniques and banking systems of the Italian cities, there can be no doubting that the merchants of the Rhône valley knew how to read and sometimes write for negotiating purposes.

Whatever the case may be, the mission that Vaudès undertook, proclaiming the Word of God and gathering together for this purpose biblical texts translated into the vernacular, was to lead him and his companions to read in private and in public. Certainly, this veneration of the holy scriptures would not transform the Poor of Lyons into refined men of letters, sages or Byzantine theologians. But this was not their intention either. Not being or wishing to be clerics, the Poor of Lyons found themselves rejected by a class of educated men who reacted as a privileged caste anxious not to lose its power based on the divine monopoly of the oral and the written, the Word and the holy scriptures. This is where Vaudès's prophetic naïvety lies and where the real originality of his movement can be situated. This finally explains why he was the victim of excommunication. And so it was decreed that the history of the Poor of Lyons would be written outside the Roman Church.

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